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AMERICAN
WATER-COLOURISTS

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AMERICAN WATER- COLOURISTS

BY

A. E. GALLATIN

WITH THIRTY ILLUSTRATIONS



NEW YORK

E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY

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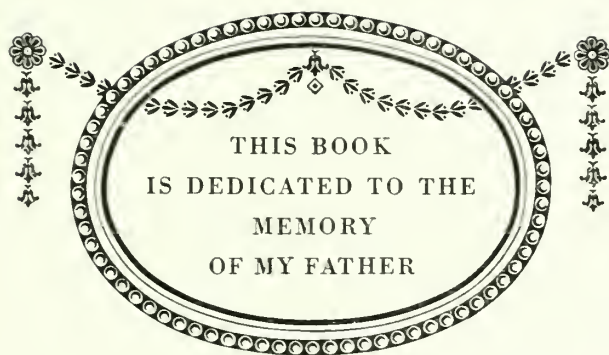
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The World Over



THIS BOOK
IS DEDICATED TO THE
MEMORY
OF MY FATHER



P R E F A C E

This little volume scarcely aims to be a comprehensive account of water-colour painting in America, for the reason that it treats almost exclusively of the significant figures, or rather of those painters whom I consider to be the chief exponents of the art. I have preferred to consider the men of consequence and weight, those who have mastered the medium, and whose drawings reveal a personal expression, as well as at least something of the spirit of modernity—for no matter how unsympathetic an artist

may be towards this age and all its commercialism, it is necessary, if his art is to be alive and vital, that he should not ignore what is going on in the world to-day. Let it not be supposed however that I have been captious enough to completely ignore all but the indispensable men: where real merit exists I have endeavoured to pay at least a brief tribute. But as for assuming the rôle of historian, that is something to which I have not aspired: willingly I leave to others the task of parading the mediocre.

To acquaint one's self with the drawings of the American water-colourists it is necessary, with the exception of Sargent and Winslow Homer, to seek out their works in various private collections. Sargent is adequately represented in the Brooklyn Institute, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. To a much lesser extent this is also true of Homer. A group of Dodge Macknight's water-colours is in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, most of them in storage, but to be seen upon application. A few Macknights, as well as

several choice Sargents and Homers and a Whistler, are hung in the Fogg Art Museum of Harvard University. Two of Childe Hassam's water-colours are owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where also may be seen single examples of Whistler and John Marin, both of them gifts. Charles Demuth and Mary Cassatt are not represented in any of the public galleries. Neither the Art Institute of Chicago nor the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts owns a single American water-colour of any distinction.

But if the museums have not paid much attention to the water-colourists, this fortunately is not true of the private collectors, many of whom have had the intelligence and the wit to acquire the water-colours of Macknight, of Marin and of Demuth, as they bought those of Whistler and Homer during the life-time of those artists. The painter of originality and talent who turns for support to the State, to the public museums or to organized art societies is doomed to disappointment. If it were not for the support and encouragement of enlightened critics

and of amateurs and collectors, the genius of many painters would never reach maturity.

To realize completely the talent of Dodge Macknight it is imperative that one should visit the private gallery of Mr Desmond FitzGerald at Brookline, Massachusetts. In this gallery of Mr FitzGerald's, which is open to the public, as well as in his house, which adjoins the gallery, one can view the whole range of the artist's work, exhibited in several hundred examples. The earliest drawings are there, as well as the most recent, for this collector fathomed Macknight's greatness in the beginning of his career. In passing I may note that a few years ago Mr FitzGerald brought together in a privately printed volume all of the facts concerning this painter's life and work.

A number of collectors have acquired groups of John Marin's water-colours, several of them important, but the two great collections, both as regards quality and size, are those owned by the artist himself and by Mr Alfred Stieglitz. From the earliest days, when Marin was making etchings and pastels

under the spell of Whistler, but very masterly for all that, right down to his most recent and maddest abstractions, Mr Stieglitz has been Marin's guide, philosopher and friend. At his diminutive gallery in New York Mr Stieglitz introduced Marin to the public in a series of one-man shows extending from 1908 to 1917, purchasing a group of drawings from each of these exhibitions for his own collection.

A. E. G.

Versailles, June 1922.

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*AMERICAN
WATER-
COLOURISTS*

During recent years a number of America's most talented artists have made a serious study of the technique of water-colour drawing, with admirable results. Neither the architects—who at present lead the world—nor the sculptors, who have produced some notably good work, have shown greater progress and mastery, while the painters and etchers, as well as those employing other mediums of graphic expression, have not equalled what the water-colourists have accomplished. While it would

scarcely be correct to assert that an American school of water-colourists has actually been established, it is undeniable that the water-colourists have created traditions for themselves, in addition to achieving splendid results and developing new possibilities for the medium. These artists have not acted as a body, but on the contrary have been absolutely independent of each other, and in but one or two instances have they affiliated themselves in any way with such moribund institutions as the American Water-Colour Society and the New York Water-Colour Club, of whose exhibitions it might be said with but little exaggeration that they include practically everything except true water-colour drawings.

The important school of painters in water-colour which arose in England during the early part of the last century, under the undisputed leadership of Turner, one of the great masters of the medium, was much more extensive than the group of American painters whose work we are now considering. Certainly as great importance, however, must inevitably attach to the contemporary American group,

when we consider that Winslow Homer produced his greatest masterpieces when working in this medium; that Whistler and Sargent were never happier in their results than when employing water-colour; that John Marin, aside from his work as an etcher, and Charles Demuth rarely use any other medium; that Dodge Macknight's exhibited work has been executed entirely in pure aquarelle (as a young man Macknight made a few pastels and now occasionally paints in oil) and that Childe Hassam, Walter Gay, Mary Cassatt, as well as numerous other gifted painters, have frequently directed their talent into this channel. In this connection it is interesting to note that Winslow Homer and John Marin, two of the greatest painters which this country has produced, are both essentially American, both as regards ancestry and freedom from the influence of foreign masters. The same is also true of Dodge Macknight, Charles Demuth and Charles Burchfield.

Turner introduced a certain brilliancy and an impressionistic directness of handling into his water-

colours, as well as a romantic and imaginative quality, which place his work in this medium far above that of his contemporaries, either English or Dutch. This fine tonalist learned what there was to learn from the matter-of-fact, academic drawings of his contemporaries, so dry in technique: it has been truly said that Girtin opened the door and Turner entered in. But Turner having assimilated the work of his contemporaries, then proceeded to carry the art of water-colour drawing to far greater heights. In varying degrees some of the traditions established by Turner have borne fruit in the work of Whistler, Sargent, Homer and Macknight, whose summary treatment, love of sunlight and impressionism stem back to his discoveries. The drawings of Macknight, in which one does not find the use of body colour, are much more transparent and sparkling than Turner's,—and these are great virtues in water-colour painting,—for many of Turner's drawings contain solid impastos of body colour. Far more transparent also are the water-colours of Whistler, Sargent and

Homer, whose use of body colour has been very limited.

John S. Sargent is the Carolus Duran of his day, the crowned king of fashionable portrait painters, the idol of the Royal Academy and the Salon. It is doubtful if he has missed a single official honour which comes the painter's way. An immensely clever technician, his paintings full of the bravura one finds in the work of Hals, his portraits are nearly always conventional in treatment and painted according to the traditions of the academies. A few of Sargent's portraits are very remarkable and stand high in contemporary portraiture, but the supreme artistry found in a fine Manet or Whistler does not belong to Sargent.

Born in Florence, of American parentage, Sargent studied at first in the country of his birth and afterwards in Paris, under Carolus Duran. This painter, famous in his day, is now all but forgotten, while Manet, Cézanne, Renoir and other *refusés* are now ranked with the Old Masters and Manet has been admitted to the Louvre. Settling after-

wards in London, Sargent quickly dominated the Royal Academy and in due course was claimed by the British School, along with other famous Americans, including Gilbert Stuart, Whistler, E. A. Abbey and Epstein, the sculptor.

Sargent has painted his water-colours with true gusto; they are holiday recreations, glimpses and souvenirs of his travels on the continent of Europe and elsewhere. The painter's undoubted talent is sometimes seen to better advantage in these drawings than in his pictures. We can not help but admire the marvellous dexterity displayed by Sargent in his water-colours and the ease with which he washes in his drawings, as well as their superb breadth of treatment. They are arresting snap-shots which dazzle us by their brilliancy, short-hand notes which display the painter's astounding skill. Although not as profound interpretations of nature as Homer's and Marin's, the water-colours of Sargent are never dull; we can rarely say of them, to borrow the now classic utterance of Queen Victoria (as quoted by Lytton Strachey): "We are not amused."

The Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences possesses a collection of Sargent's water-colours which is unrivalled, both as regards quality and variety. Eighty-three in number, these water-colours were purchased from the artist in 1909, by special subscription. The subjects are very diverse and include mountain scenery in Switzerland, marble quarries at Carrara, studies of architecture and monuments, sketches of people. A number are of the canals of Venice, while others were drawn in Spain, in Syria, in Palestine, in Sicily, in Portugal, in Morocco, in Stamboul, in Corfu, in Rome, Genoa and Naples. All are delightful sketches, spontaneous, and for the greater part transparent and fresh in colour. They are thoroughly enjoyable, even when we realize that this cosmopolitan painter has not quite got at the root of the matter, the fundamentals, with the certainty of such a man as Homer, who felt much more deeply. A very representative group of Sargent's water-colours is also owned by the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, a collection of forty-five examples purchased from

the painter in 1912; many of them were drawn at the same time as those in the Brooklyn Institute. In the Metropolitan Museum of Art are ten excellent examples, painted in the Tyrol, in Venice, in Spain and elsewhere. As was the case with the two collections above commented upon, these drawings were also purchased from the painter, in 1915.

Winslow Homer is in the very front rank of American water-colourists, indeed he was "one of the few great masters of the medium the world has known" and "he knew the meaning of wash as few have known it." I quote from some notes on Homer's water-colours written by Marsden Hartley, the talented American painter and the author of a volume of well considered and illuminating art criticism. There is no exaggeration in this: as a technician Homer was without a peer. Which is not to say that he possessed the vision and imagination of the ancient Chinese, or their sense of design.

Homer came of pure New England stock: he was a Yankee to the core. Among his ancestors were

many seafaring men, and his intense love for the sea was a part of his inheritance, as was his knowledge of her varying moods. His art is intensely American, more so perhaps than that of any other painter.

Far more significance attaches to Homer's water-colours than to his paintings in oil, for in that medium he was not a brilliant technician and his handling was rather laboured. The water-colours are very luminous. The material has been used exactly as it should be and as regards colour they are much more beautiful than the paintings in oil. Homer himself likely enough preferred his water-colours to his paintings; this belief is strengthened by the fact that at the Pan-American Exposition, held at Buffalo a number of years ago, Homer elected to be represented solely by his water-colours. The effect made by this collection, the writer recalls, was very impressive.

In addition to choosing subjects connected with the sea, Homer often painted rivers and mountains, into which he introduced figures of men, as well as

animals and fish, the latter being especially well-painted. All are executed with the same authority and distinction, although none are quite as fine as certain of the West Indian subjects. An excellent group of these, twelve in number, was shown at the memorial exhibition of Homer's works which was held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1910, the year of the artist's death. Afterwards these water-colours were purchased by the Museum for its permanent collection from the estate of the artist. They were painted at Nassau, in the Bahamas, in Bermuda and in Cuba, and the semi-tropical vegetation of these colourful islands, as well as the marvellous blue sea, has been superbly rendered. They stand as unrivalled examples of Homer's art.

Dodge Macknight, one of the most significant of the American water-colourists, has always been engrossed in the study of sunlight and a follower of the theories of Impressionism. Born in Providence, Macknight has been a great wanderer, in many parts of the world. Extremes of heat and cold

have held a special attraction for him, amounting almost to a passion: from the frigid snow-fields of New Hampshire, seen under a brilliant winter sun, he has travelled to the sun-baked plains or hills of Mexico and Algeria.

As a young man Macknight went to Paris, from whence some years later he journeyed to Spain. From 1900 to 1912 he was settled on Cape Cod, during which period he made trips to Jamaica and to Mexico. In recent years his wanderings have taken him to Newfoundland, to the Grand Canyon of the Colorado River, and recently once more to the northern coast of Africa.

In all of these parts of the world Macknight has made water-colours of surpassing interest. Macknight is a true aquarellist, in the modern, and correct, sense: he stains white paper with transparent washes. No water-colourist has approached him in his amazing method of depicting snow seen under a brilliant sun. A brush wet with blue pigment is rapidly drawn over the white paper—a few strokes suffice—and he has caught the very

quality of the snow, sparkling and vibrating under the dazzling sunlight of a New Hampshire winter. Occasionally one misses the fresh point of attack in these drawings that one always feels in a Marin; at times it is almost as if a formula had been employed. A spot of vermilion, either a sleigh or a roof, nearly always appears as a foil to the white and blue snow, but in spite of this Macknight is always quite masterly in his results.

Whistler, who mastered the majority of the mediums of artistic expression, including painting, etching, lithography and the pastel, was also a water-colourist of the greatest distinction. Some of his most engaging work was done in aquarelle: sketches of models, landscapes and marines of great delicacy and consummate artistry. This medium was peculiarly adapted to Whistler's genius, and his water-colours are delightfully fresh, both in conception and execution—notes and arrangements of delicate tones always pregnant with style and the rarest beauty. The sensitive drawings by him which are reproduced in this volume (for the

first time) in monotone have inevitably lost something of their charm in this translation; with a powerful artist like Homer the loss has been almost negligible.

Childe Hassam, one of the principal exponents of Impressionism in this country, John H. Twachtman, Theodore Robinson and Ernest Lawson being the others, painted a set of water-colours on the Isles of Shoals, lying off the New England coast, which give him an undisputed place with the masters of American water-colour. In this series, which was begun in 1912 and finished four years later, the rocky coast, covered with stunted and wind-tortured vegetation, and the deep blue water are beautifully rendered. Splendid in colour, finely composed and drawn with great freedom and gusto, these drawings as interpretations of nature deserve very high rank. The water-colours which Hassam made during 1915 of the Hudson River and its surrounding mountains and bordering towns, as well as in different parts of New England, are not nearly as compelling; nor is the Rockport Quarry set of

1919. In these drawings the painter's broken line and very personal technique, so familiar in his paintings, has not seemed to be the proper method; in any event the strong and bold strokes which distinguish the Isles of Shoals series have produced far more satisfactory results. Still another series, executed during the summer of 1920 at Portsmouth, the picturesque old town on the coast of New Hampshire, noted for its colonial architecture, at the time of writing has not been exhibited.

Mary Cassatt has spent practically all her life in France and her work is quite of the French tradition. A pupil and an ardent admirer of Degas, Miss Cassatt has found inspiration in his work, as he in turn learned many lessons from Ingres. She has studied Degas's art most intelligently and her pictures are entirely her own; one can scarcely say this of Berthe Morisot (a more gifted and delicate painter than Mary Cassatt) and her debt to Manet. While Miss Cassatt's most important work has been executed in pastel, in oil and in etching, she has made also quite a number of studies in

water-colour which possess great charm. In these drawings the artist has chosen for her subjects the young women, the children and the infants which have been her especial delight to portray. Mere sketches though many of them are, studies for the paintings and pastels, they are well drawn and pure and fresh in colour.

Walter Gay, who has also passed the greater part of his life in France, which is to say Paris, is another American whose art is distinctly French in feeling. His pictures showing the interiors of beautiful old châteaux and Parisian hôtels are painted with a rare art and have pointed the way for a numerous school of followers. As a water-colourist Mr Gay has also attained great perfection, some of his best work having been executed in this medium. In addition to giving us sympathetic portraits of charming old rooms, Mr Gay has often gone to the park or the moat of some château for his subject; these out-of-door drawings are full of sparkling sunlight and are set down in a delightfully vivacious manner.

John La Farge is another highly gifted American painter who often turned his attention to water-colour, with admirable results. The landscapes which he painted in Samoa are very fine. The landscapes in water-colour of J. Alden Weir, many of which were executed in England, are fresh enough in their way and not without charm, although of no more significance in the history of painting than his oils. The landscapes of Francis McComas are quite handsome in design; the figure studies of Robert Blum, Arthur B. Davies, Walt Kuhn and Rockwell Kent are not without decided merit. One can say the same of Maurice Prendergast's water-colours, although, being almost identical as regards technique and colour, they become very monotonous. William Zorach is nearly always interesting; whether painting landscapes or figures, his composition is amusing, his colour rich. The strong and forceful landscape drawings of Charles Burchfield, so full of gusto, are of decided consequence. Hailing from some little hamlet in Ohio, dominated by a railway line, this young painter

positively revels in laying bare the sordidness of his surroundings.

With Cézanne came a new tradition for the painter in water-colour, a freshness and a transparency which did not hitherto exist. Came also from this great innovator, one of the most notable in the history of painting, profound studies of plastic relations and of significant forms, suggested with the most sensitive washes of exquisite colour and "realized" (to employ a term often used by the painter) more often than in the paintings in oil. In a general way it is to this tradition that belong the water-colours of John Marin and Charles Demuth, who have built up their drawings in much the same spirit as did Cézanne, and the Chinese before him, not caring merely for the purely graphic appearance of nature, the superficial aspect.

John Marin is not only one of the greatest and most profound artists America has produced, but as a water-colourist he stands supreme: it is necessary to travel back to the ancient Chinese masters to find his equal. Among contemporary European

painter-artists the Frenchmen Raoul Dufy and Matisse are about the only ones who can be mentioned in the same breath. Marin has sought not merely to copy nature, to give us literal transcripts, after the manner of the Impressionists, but rather to portray an emotion, to "emphasize nature here, and distort it there, all in harmony with a definite artistic purpose" (I borrow these words from a work on Japanese landscape gardening). He is not interested in formulas; the roots of his art are deeply embedded in the soil of New England, and it is there that his genius derives most of its nourishment. Marin himself, in an explanatory note on his work, has written: "These works are meant as constructive expressions of the inner senses, responding to things seen and felt. One responds differently towards different things: one even responds differently towards the same thing. In reality it is the same thing no longer; you are in a different mood."

No one has produced a handsomer wash than Marin, a wash comparable to the best to be found

in Chinese art, and no one has excelled him as a colourist. Marin is a visionary, his work, always so beautifully organized and so superb in design, is full of mystery. Emotions are evoked which show him to be a poet with the rapture of Shelley.

“All that we perceive around us is merely raw material,” wrote Goethe in his introduction to *The Propyläen*, the periodical which he assisted in founding and whose purpose was to spread sound ideas about art, “If it happens rarely enough that an artist, through instinct and taste, through practice and experiment, reaches the point of attaining the beautiful exterior of things, of selecting the best from the good before him, and of producing at least an agreeable appearance, it is still more rare, particularly in modern times, for an artist to penetrate into the depths of things as well as into the depths of his own soul.” Also, continues Goethe, “When the artist takes any object of Nature, the object no longer belongs to Nature; indeed we say that the artist creates the object in that moment, by extracting from it all that is significant, characteristic,

interesting, or rather by putting into it a higher value." This, I think, is exactly what Marin has done: Goethe might have been writing about Marin.

It was not until January of 1922 that Marin's work was adequately brought before the larger public. At that time one of the New York galleries showed one hundred and ten of the artist's water-colours, dating from 1908 to 1921, four oil paintings (1921), rare experiments which in technique were very like the water-colours, and a group of thirty-one etchings, the latter dating from 1906 to 1915 and including French, Venetian and New York subjects. None of the admirable pastels which Marin executed in Venice, like the majority of the etchings belonging to the Whistler tradition, were shown. Aside from this the exhibition was most comprehensive and for the first time the public had an opportunity to study the artist's genius at full length, for his entire artistic evolution was set forth.

The earliest example shown was a drawing made at Meaux in 1908 and this was followed by several

executed in the Tyrol during the summer of 1910, a group containing some of the most spirited and delightful things Marin has ever done; a certain measure of success had come to him and he was in a holiday mood, as is apparent in these joyous washes of entrancing colour. To the same year belong a number of drawings showing how the skyscrapers of New York reacted upon him, and then interpretations of Adirondack, Maine and Pennsylvania landscapes, dating from 1912 to 1921, and becoming more and more abstract in character each year. Finally we arrive at a set of drawings of down-town New York, several of them showing the Brooklyn Bridge, drawings pregnant with dynamic energy which reflect the very soul of New York.

Marin has prepared a brief autobiographical sketch, from which we learn that he was born in 1872, or thereabouts, in Rutherford, New Jersey, and that for four years he worked in an architect's office. His schooling consisted of two years spent at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and one at the Art Students' League in New York, after

which he passed four years in Europe, mostly in France.

Charles Demuth, with respect to the subjects of his water-colours, is one of the most versatile of the American masters of the medium: this gifted artist has made studies of flowers, views of factories and other buildings, landscape interpretations, illustrations for various works of fiction, and studies of vaudeville performers. All are conceived and executed in a very modern spirit. Demuth, who was born and who lives in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, receiving his schooling at the Pennsylvania Academy, is another aquarellist whose work is essentially American in feeling.

Demuth's talent is confined within very definite limits; his drawings are always conspicuous for their perfect taste and a certain daintiness which amounts at times almost to fastidiousness. His drawings of flowers (he has also made one of a Japanese orange tree) are exquisite, full of the most delicate draughtsmanship and alluring colour. Style they possess, as well as something of the

subtle charm one finds in the flower subjects of Redon and Fantin-Latour. In the rendering of flowers no other American has equalled him. Demuth's drawings of buildings, usually made at Provincetown, Massachusetts, or Coatsville, Pennsylvania, are full of the locality of the scene.

For Zola's *Nana* Demuth has made seven or eight illustrations; for Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* four; for a book by Wedekind, a modern German dramatist, seven; for Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death* a single drawing, as he has for Balzac's *The Girl of the Golden Eyes*; while three were drawn for Henry James's *The Beast in the Jungle*. These water-colours are full of imagination and display consummate artistry; it is regrettable that only a few of them have been published, for no American has done quite such distinguished work in this direction. As works of art, in distinction to their illustrative value, these water-colours possess an importance such as attaches to the decorative illustrations of Aubrey Beardsley, the greatest master of black and white the world has

known since Dürer and Holbein. One scents in these drawings of Demuth a certain admiration for the lithographs of Toulouse-Lautrec, as one does also in the fifty or sixty acrobat and other vaudeville drawings which the artist has made. Besides possessing Lautrec's love for the theatre and the circus, we find in Demuth's drawings unusual but perfectly balanced compositions, a line which is alive and vital, and colour harmonies of rare beauty—all qualities also common to the great Frenchman. Rumour has it that Demuth may make a set of drawings for a volume dealing with the great vaudeville artists which Marsden Hartley is said to contemplate writing: what a delightful book this would be !

ILLUSTRATIONS

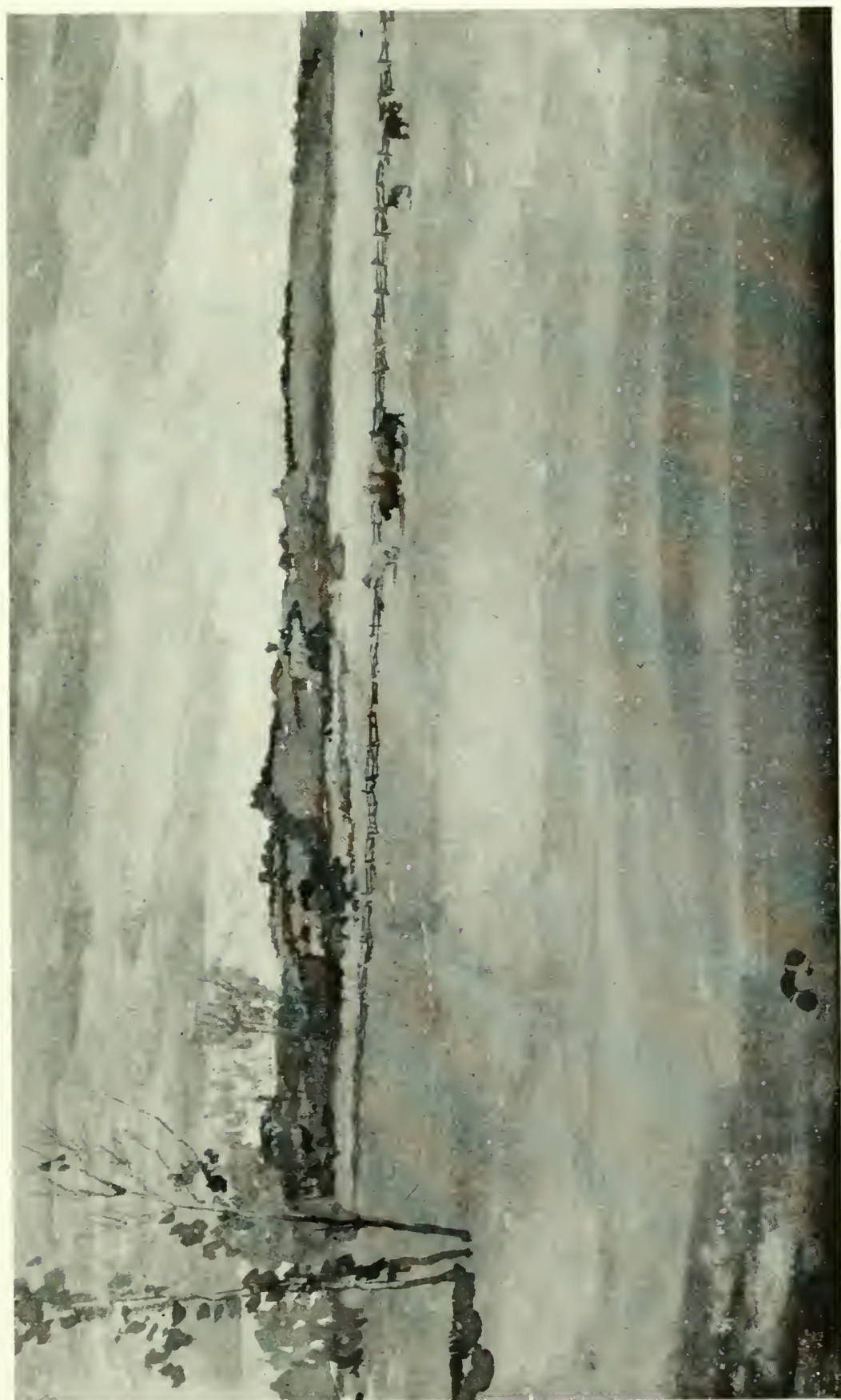
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JAMES MCNEILL WHISTLER
On the Mersey



JAMES McNEILL WHISTLER

Green Fields, near Loches



3

JAMES McNEILL WHISTLER

Sunday at Domberg



4

JAMES McNEILL WHISTLER

Forget-me-not



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WINSLOW HOMER

Palm Tree, Nassau



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WINSLOW HOMER

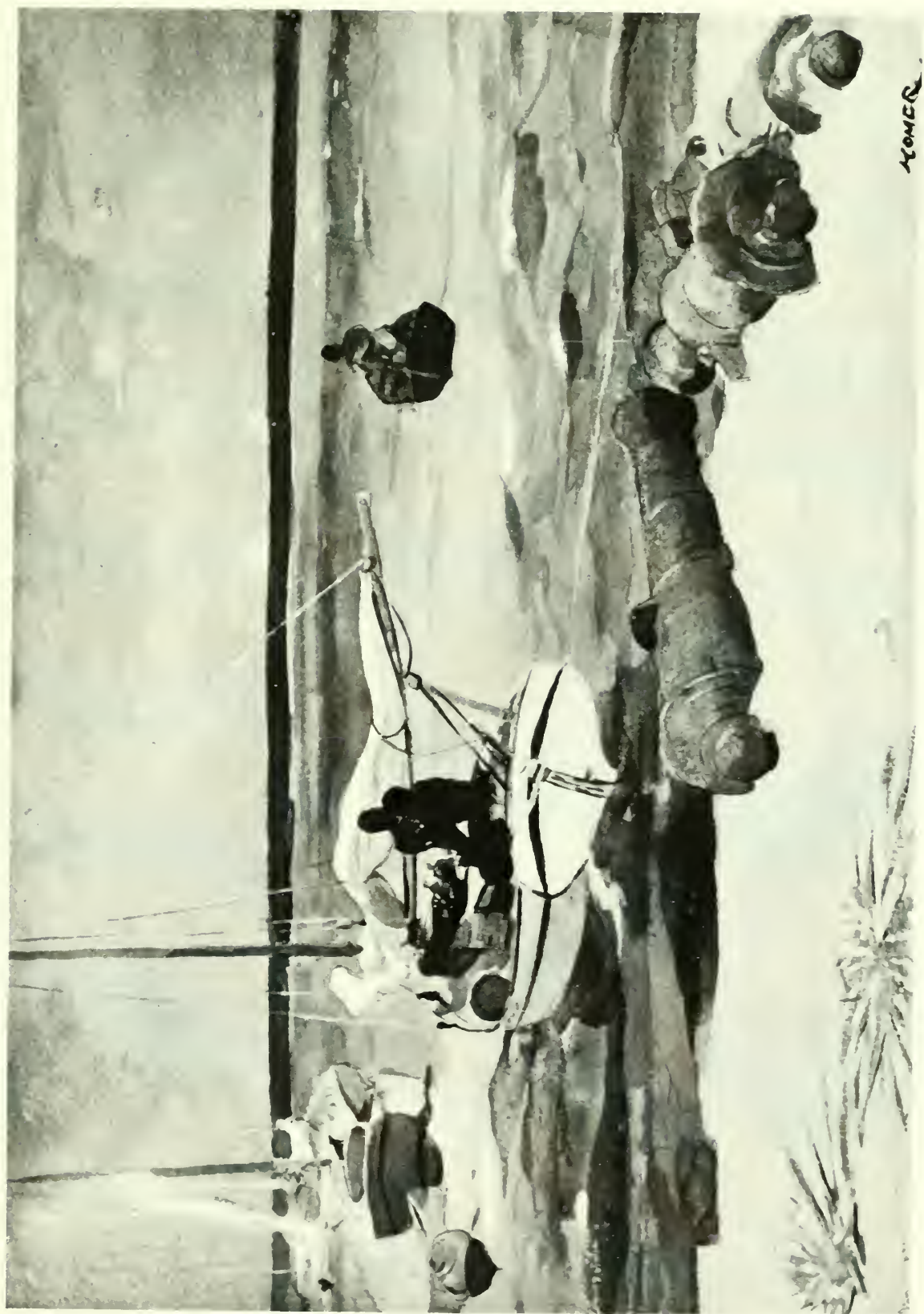
Tornado, Bahamas



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WINSLOW HOMER

Bermuda



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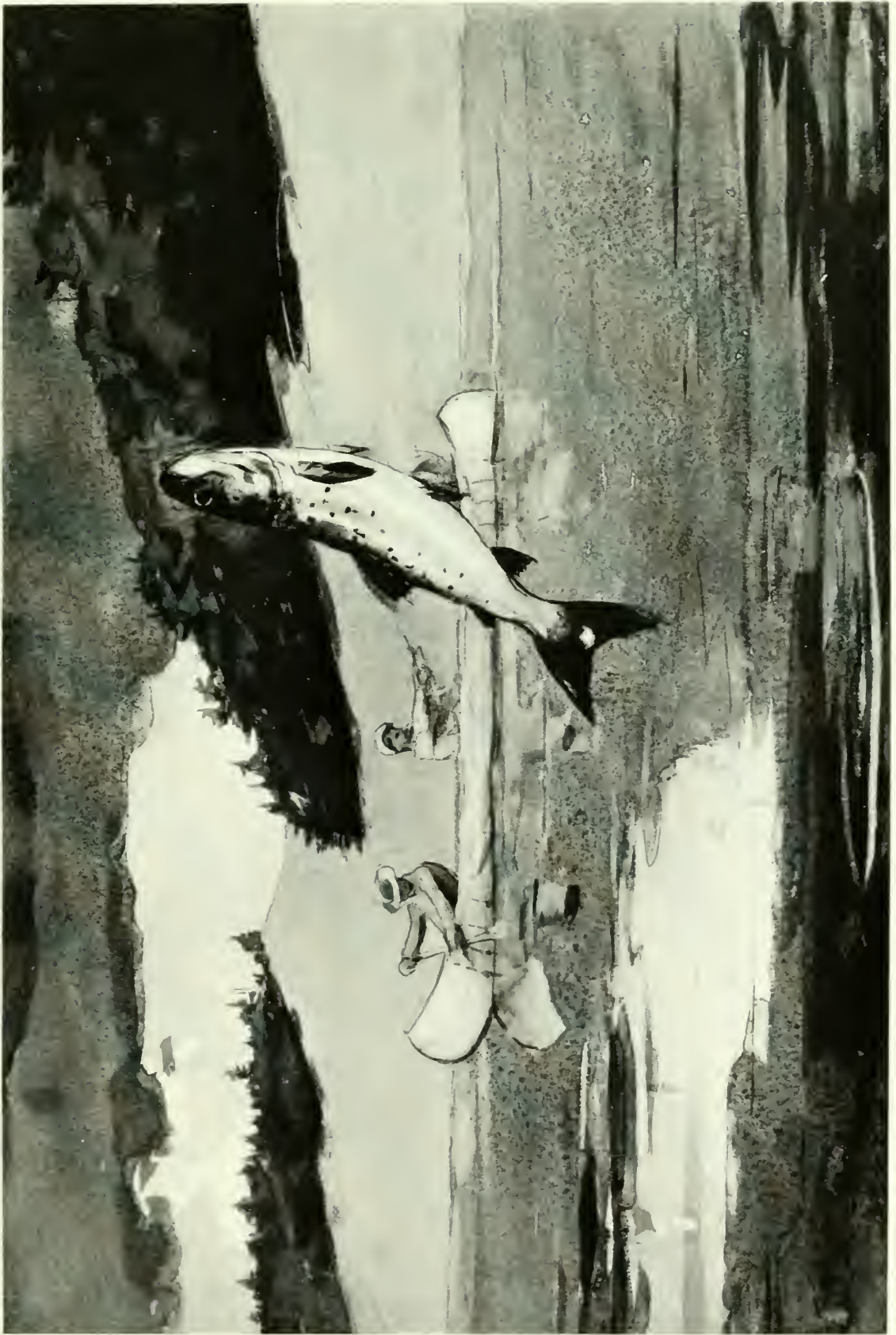
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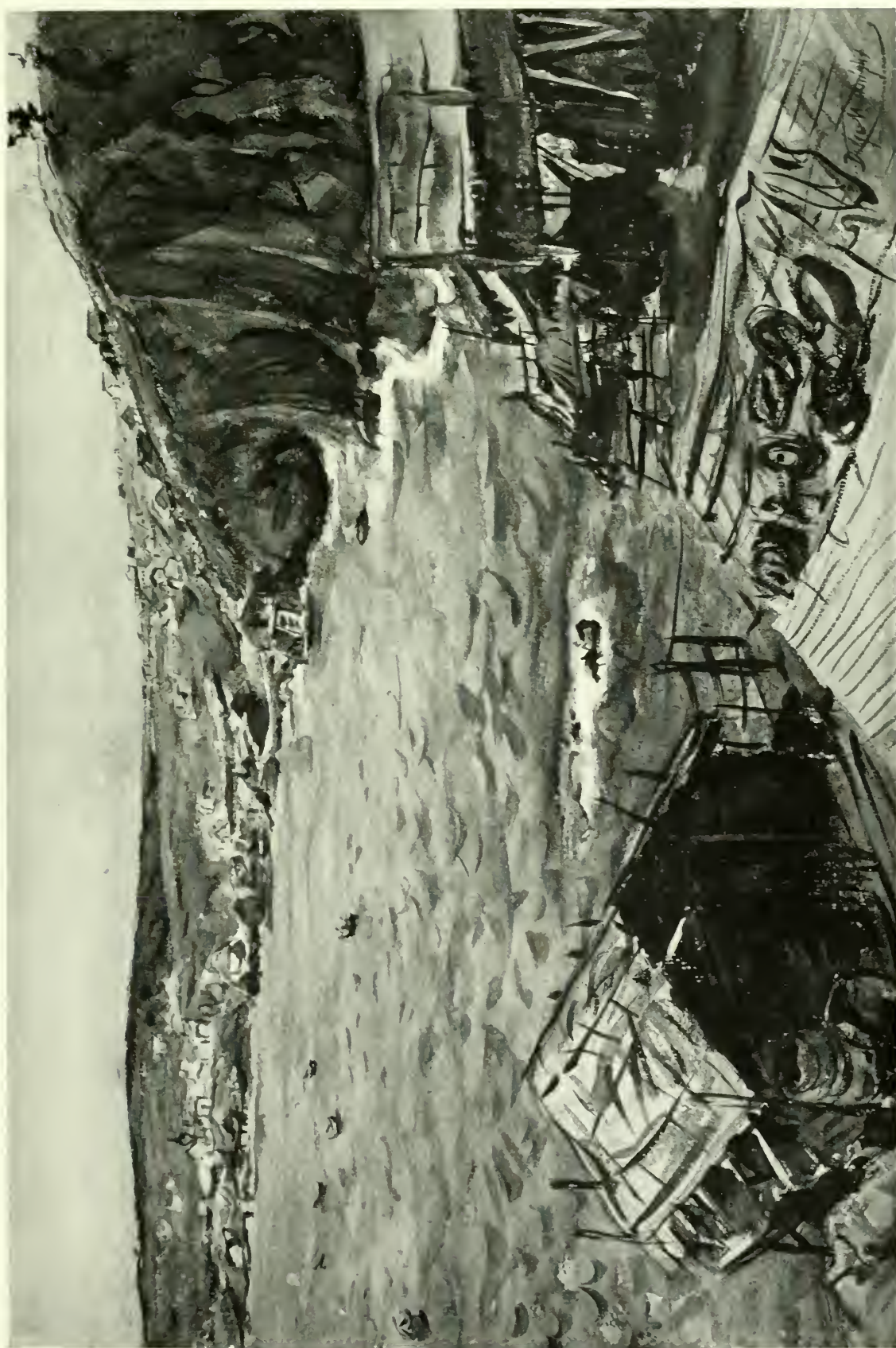
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CHARLES DEMUTH

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WALTER GAY

Chinoiserie



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MARY CASSATT

Mother and Child



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CHARLES BURCHFIELD

The New Moon





BOOKS ON ART

BY

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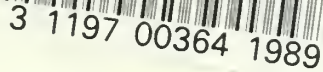
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